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ABSTRACT

Noting that, historically, newspaper editors copied the best, and sometimes erroneous, stories from other newspapers published in distant cities, this paper explores newpaper coverage of the 1871 Great Chicago Fire, and the myth that Mrs. O'Leary's cow was to blame. After suggesting that a report invented the story of the O'Leary cow kicking a lantern and starting the fire, the first portion of the paper describes the dry and fire-prone conditions of the city at the time, the O'Leary family, and the fire's destruction. The middle portion describes how the four Chicago newspapers, their offices destroyed, still managed to publish in the days immediately following the fire. This section also examines initial newspaper accounts of the fire, which did in fact begin in O'Leary's barn, and traces the origins of the "irate cow" story. The next section explores accounts published in papers across the country, discussing why the stories were so sensational and inaccurate. These include a story stating that the fire was the result of a communist conspiracy. The last portion of the paper describes various witnesses and their testimony before the Board of Police and Fire Commissioners--most of them exonerating the O'Learys of blame for the fire--and then discusses the most likely causes of the fire, and the likelihood that the "cow story" had been a hoax intended to make the story more lively. (HTH)

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Mrs. O'Leary's Cow And Other Newspaper Tales About The Chicago Fire Of 1871

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A paper presented to the History Division of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication at its convention in Memphis, Tenn., August 1985.

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Mrs. O'Leary's Cow And Other Newspaper Tales

About The Chicago Fire Of 1871

For 200 years, editors obtained much of the news by subscribing to the papers published in distant cities and by copying their best stories. If one newspaper published an interesting error, the editors in other cities might copy that error, not knowing (or perhaps caring) that the story was false. Newspaper readers might quote the error, so a single error could be repeated thousands of times.

The errors embarrassed innocent victims and fooled millions of Americans. One of the most famous errors involves Mrs. O'Leary's cow, which was accused of starting the Chicago fire.

Chicago's great fire of 1871 started in the O'Leary's barn, but Mrs. O'Leary was in bed at the time. Because of a sore foot, Mrs. O'Leary had gone to bed early that night. The tale about her cow seems to have been created by a reporter who wanted to make his story about the fire more interesting. It was a fanciful tale, much more interesting than the truth. Other journalists copied it, and the public believed and remembered it.

Newspapers far from Chicago also published other inaccurate and sensational stories about the fire. For example: newspapers reported that vigilantes killed hordes of thieves and arsonists, and that 2,500 babies were born and died during the fire.

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Conditions In Chicago

The summer of 1871 was unusually dry. Chicago's last heavy rain fell on July 3. During the next three months, the city recorded only one brief rainfall and a few sprinkles.

The Chicago Tribune called the city an enormous firetrap. The Tribune explained that 90% of the buildings in Chicago were constructed of wood.[1] Some, particularly those in the business district, had brick or stone walls -- but wooden floors, window frames, doors, and roofs. A few owners considered their buildings fireproof, but even their buildings had wooden rafters and tar roofs.[2]

Chicago also had 56 miles of wooden (pine block) streets and 561 miles of wooden sidewalks. Coal and lumber yards lined the banks of the Chicago River. Homes contained other flammable materials: wood or coal for heat and kerosene for light.

About 300,000 people lived in Chicago, but the city employed only 200 firemen and owned only 17 steam-powered fire engines. The city's Board of Police and Fire Commissioners complained that the tar roofs were unsafe, that the city's water supply was inadequate, and that the city's fire hydrants were too far apart. The board wanted to require the use of metal roofs, to hire more firemen, and to purchase several fire boats, but the city's Common Council ignored its recommendations.[3]

The O'Leary Family

Patrick O'Leary, his wife, and their five children lived at 137 DeKoven Street. The O'Learys were poor and lived in a neighborhood of wooden shanties. Witnesses said DeKoven Street was unpaved and littered with papers, boxes, scraps of wood, and other garbage. A reporter called it "a mean little street of shabby wooden houses, with dirty dooryards, and unpainted fences falling to decay."[4]

O'Leary was a laborer, "a pick and shovel man, available for anything that needed muscle."[5] His wife, Catharine, was a plump woman, about 35 years old.

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Mrs. O'Leary kept five cows, a calf, and a horse in a barn behind their house. She milked the cows at 5 a.m. and at 4:30 p.m. every day, then loaded the milk onto a wagon and sold it to neighbors.

The O'Learys had purchased their home for $300 and lived in three rooms in the back. They rented the front half to Patrick McLaughlin, a railroad man. From the outside, the house looked cheaply built: plain, unpainted, and almost square, with few windows.

The barn was about 40 feet behind their house. It was a two-story structure, 14 feet high, but only 16 by 20 feet wide. Three tons of hay were stored in the loft.

The Great Fire

On a Saturday night -- Oct. 7 -- flames broke out at a woodworking factory on Canal Street. The area contained several lumber yards, saloons, and cheap wooden homes. Flames raged out of control until 3:30 a.m. Sunday, almost completely destroying every building on four city blocks and causing $1 million in damages.

One or two fire engines were burned during the fire. But more importantly, the city's firemen were exhausted. Later, critics charged that they became drunk after extinguishing the fire. Some critics charged that Chicago's firemen celebrated every great fire "by a good thorough drunk."[6] However, their charges were never proven.

Chicago's "Great Fire" started that Sunday night. For the next 24 hours, flames raced through the city and could be seen in Peoria, 100 miles to the south.

Experts say a 20- to 30-mile-an-hour wind was blowing in off the prairie, toward Lake Michigan. Witnesses remember a much stronger wind, one blowing toward

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the heart of the city at almost tornado strength. Typically, a newsman recalled, "A gale of wind was blowing from the southwest and urging the fire onward over the wealthiest and handsomest portion of the place."[7] Experts concluded that the fire became so large and so hot that it created tremendous updrafts and cyclonic winds similar to those reported in German cities bombed during World War II.[8]

Chicago's firemen were helpless. Intense heat and tremendous flames destroyed the lumber and coal yards along the Chicago River. All the city's water pumps were located in a single building with a wooden roof. After flames destroyed the building, firemen were unable to obtain any more water from the city's fire hydrants. They moved their engines to the Chicago River or to Lake Michigan and pumped water directly from them. But their hoses could not reach the heart of the city, and flames raced through it unopposed.

The fire gained in strength, spreading faster and faster. Flames shot forward as though they were aimed from a blowtorch, destroying blocks of banks, stores, hotels, theaters, and government offices. After leaping across the Chicago River, they struck the North Side, turning its homes and factories to ashes. Witnesses reported a continuous sheet of flames, 2 miles long and 1 mile wide.

A journalist visiting Chicago that weekend almost died in his hotel. He was tired from watching the fire on Saturday night and went to bed at 10:30. As he was falling asleep, the journalist heard a fire alarm somewhere in the city. Later, he heard other unusual noises but fell back asleep. When he finally got up and threw open the blinds, he "gazed upon a sheet of flames towering 100 feet above the top of the hotel."

The journalist ran out and reported: "There was a tempest of wind, and shortly there could be seen a river of red cinders and burning timbers in the sky, apparently miles in length, sweeping across the Chicago River at the doomed business district, out onto Lake Michigan, to the northeast."[9]

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Another journalist remained in bed until the city's fire bells sounded a general alarm, then looked out and saw a row of wooden tenements on fire. He reported: "A column of flame would shoot up from a burning building, catch the force of the wind, and strike the next one....It was simply indescribable in its terrible grandeur."[10]

People hurried through the streets, carrying bundles of clothing and household goods on their shoulders. Wagons also hurried to and fro, loaded with household goods and with the merchandise salvaged from stores.

Thousands of people ran toward Lake Michigan, then stood neck deep in the water to escape the heat and flames. Others fled toward Lincoln Park, formerly the city cemetery. Families were separated, so husbands and wives -- even parents and their children -- had no idea where they could find one another. Many feared their relatives were dead.

The fire burned itself out after reaching the northern city limits on Monday night. A cold rain started at about midnight, and it helped extinguish the remaining flames.

Almost nothing survived. Iron railings melted. Lamp posts drooped. Walls crumbled into heaps of rubbish. Witnesses said that even brick and stone buildings melted in the terrible heat, and a Chicago paper reported that marble buildings "were burned to quicklime, crumbled, fell, and disappeared as though they were the mere toys of children." Another source said the intense heat "melted down five-story brick and stone buildings in five minutes...."[11] Other witnesses said the interiors of brick and stone buildings burned, and that the buildings' walls cracked or collapsed, but never melted.

The fire swept over 2,100 acres: an area 4 miles long and 1 mile wide. It destroyed 17,500 of the city's 60,000 buildings. About 100,000 people (one-third of the population) were homeless. The damage totalled nearly $200 million.

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Chicago's Newspapers Rebuild

The fire destroyed every newspaper office in Chicago.

At first, the city's business district had seemed safe. The fire started a long way away, and many downtown buildings -- including the four-story Tribune Building -- were supposed to be fireproof. Buildings directly opposite the Tribune Building later burst into flames, and the flames seeped under the wooden pavement and sidewalk, igniting a barbershop in its basement. Employees extinguished those flames, then returned to work.

The Tribune's employees were determined to publish a paper that day. When the city's gas mains burst, depriving them of light, they burned candles. When the city's water mains broke, they were forced to give up. They needed water for a steam engine that powered The Tribune's presses. Later, a theater wall collapsed against the Tribune Building, tearing it open to the flames.

Joseph Medill, The Tribune's editor, immediately bought a small printing plant that escaped the flames, then ordered a press from Baltimore. Within hours, the press was on its ways.

Another Chicago paper, the Evening Post, published an extra edition that Monday and, on Tuesday, reported that the fire had started in a small barn. The Post commented, "How those flames originated we do not know, though rumor has it that they were the result of incendiarism, and also that they sprang from a carelessly used pipe or cigar."[12]

The Chicago Tribune's reporters and editors returned to work on Wednesday, and their first story about the fire reported, "At 9:30 a small cow-barn attached to a house on the corner of DeKoven and Jefferson streets, one block north of Twelfth Street, emitted a bright light, followed by a blaze, and in a moment the building was hopelessly on fire."[13]

The publisher of another Chicago newspaper considered retiring. Wilbur Storey, publisher of The Chicago Times, reportedly exclaimed: "The Times is

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destroyed. Chicago is destroyed. I am an old man."[14] But Storey was only 52 years old, and his employees urged him to rebuild. Also, Storey remembered some old type he had left in a barn.

The Chicago Times resumed publication on Oct. 18 -- eight days later than its competitors -- and received a flood of advertisements from businessmen anxious to announce their new locations Within five weeks, Storey earned a profit of $4,000, and his enthusiasm returned.

The Chicago Times immediately published a long story about the fire's origin and progress. A reporter named Franc Wilkie wrote the story "with a bland disregard for facts...."[15] Much of his story was obviously fraudulent.

Wilkie reported that, "Flames were discovered in a small stable in the rear of the house on the corner of DeKoven and Jefferson streets." Wilkie added that an old Irish woman living in the house had been a welfare recipient for many years, and that: "Her very appearance indicated great poverty. She was apparently about 70 years of age, and was bent almost double with the weight from many years of toil, and trouble, and privation. Her dress corresponded with her demands, being ragged and dirty in the extreme.[16]

Wilke's story added that Mrs. O'Leary had applied for welfare, and that the county always gave it to her -- until learning that she owned a cow and sold its milk. Infuriated when the county stopped her payments, Mrs. O'Leary "swore she would bring revenge on a city that would deny her a bit of wood or a pound of bacon."

In fairness to Mrs. O'Leary, The Chicago Times declared that it would also present her side of the story. But her story was even more fradulent. The Times claimed that one of its reporters found Mrs. O'Leary "sitting on the front steps of her house...bent forward, and her head resting on her hands. She was rocking to and fro, moaning and groaning, and crying aloud after the manner of her country-woman when in great trouble. At first, she refused to speak one

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word about the fire, but only screamed at the top of her voice, 'My poor cow. My poor cow.'"

The Times continued: "On Sunday night, about 9½ o'clock, she took a lamp in her hand and went out to have a look at her pet. Then she took a notion the cow must have some salt, and she sat down the lamp and went in the house for some. In a moment, the cow had accidentally kicked over the lamp, an explosion followed, and in an instant the structure was involved in flames."*[17]

During an interview for another Chicago paper, Mrs. O'Leary complained that the story in The Times was a lie.[18] The second interview (reprinted on the following page) seems genuine. The interview appeared in The Journal, and the statements attributed to Mrs. O'Leary seem accurate, except for her description of a stranger suspected of causing the fire. Other sources never mention the stranger.

Curiously, a New York daily had published a similar story five days earlier. On Oct. 13, The (New York) World reported that Mrs. O'Leary was a welfare recipient and that the county had cut off her payments after learning that she owned six cows. The World added: "She was in the habit of visiting her cows every evening. On Saturday night she took the lamp in her hand and went out in the barn. Then she wanted some salt from the house, and she sat the lamp down to go after it. A moment later and the barn was in flames."[19]

There may be a logical explanation for the stories' similarities. Reporters in the West often supplemented their incomes by working as correspondents for newspapers in the East, and Wilkie may have written the story that appeared in The World. When his regular employer — The Chicago Times — finally resumed

*Copies of The Chicago Times are available on microfilm, but portions of its story about the fire are virtually unreadable. Persons using a magnifying glass can decipher most of the words but must guess at or omit some. As a consequence, accounts of the story quoted or reprinted elsewhere are likely to contain slight variations.

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Interview Published In The Chicago Journal

REPORTER: Are you the lady of the house?

MRS. LEARY: I am, sir.

REPORTER: Have you lived here long?

MRS. LEARY: Going on five years.

REPORTER: Do you own this place?

MRS. LEARY: I do.

REPORTER: Did the fire start in your barn?

MRS. LEARY: It did.

REPORTER: What was in it?

MRS. LEARY: Five cows, a horse, and about two tons of hay in the loft.

REPORTER: Is your husband an expressman?

MRS. LEARY: Indade, he is not. We all knocked our living out of those five blessed cows, and I never had a cint from the parish in all my life, and the dirty Times had no business to say it, bad cess to it.

REPORTER: How about that kerosene-lamp story?

MRS. LEARY: There wis not a word of truth in the whole story. I always milked my dow cows by daylight, and never had a lamp of any kind or a candle about the barn. It must have been set afire. Two neighbors at the far end of the alley saw a strange man come up about half-past 9 in the evening. He asked them was the alley straight through. They told him it was, and he went through. It was not five minutes till they saw the barn on fire. Before we had time to get out the horse or any of the cows it was all gone, and the fire was running in every direction. The boys turned to and saved the house. I hope to die if this isn't every word of it true. If you was a priest, I wouldn't tell it any different.

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publication on Oct. 18, Wilkie may have included the same "facts" in the first story he wrote for it.

Informing The Nation

The Chicago fire excited the nation. The Milwaukee Sentinel estimated that 6,000 to 7,000 people gathered at the train depot there to greet friends and relatives fleeing Chicago. People also wanted to talk with individuals who had witnessed the fire. Editors in New York placed bulletin boards outside their offices and posted the latest news on them. Thousands of people pressed around the bulletin boards, wandering from one office to another.

The first bulletins reported that Chicago was doomed. Then tension mounted because the bulletins stopped. At 7 a.m. Tuesday, The Associated Press reported that it had not received any information from Chicago for more than 12 hours.

Typically, The Atlanta Constitution published a brief story about the fire on Monday, then added, "It will be almost impossible to get any reliable detailed particulars for some time...." Two days later, The Atlanta Constitution complained that details were still difficult to obtain. It explained that flames had forced telegraph operators to abandon the Western Union offices in Chicago.

By Wednesday, the fire had been extinguished. But The Atlanta Constitution declared: "The whole city is threatened. The panic is increasing." Its story, obviously several days old, continued, "It is reported that all hope of saving the city has been given up — that it is doomed."[20]

Newspapers' style of writing added to the confusion. Newspapers received dozens of short bulletins about the fire, and most newspapers published the bulletins in chronological order. They began by reporting the first bulletins, so a single column might contain 10 or 15, including some that were old, mistaken, and inconsistent.

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The New York Times employed its own correspondent in Chicago, and a bulletin it received at 2:10 a.m. Monday warned, "The flames are raging with increased fury in every direction, and God's mercy can only save the city from utter destruction."[21] The Times' correspondent may have risked his life to transmit the bulletin. He explained: "A raging, roaring hell of fire envelopes 20 blocks of the city. It is already within a block of the telegraph office where this dispatch is written, sweeping onward a whirlwind of flames against which human efforts are powerless, and it is impossible to tell where it will stop."

On Tuesday, The Milwaukee Sentinel blamed Mrs. O'Leary's cow for the fire. A front-page story reported, "The fire broke out on the corner of DeKoven and Twelfth streets, at about 9 o'clock on Sunday evening, being caused by a cow kicking over a lamp in a stable in which a woman was milking."[22]

By 1871, The Associated Press had begun to telegraph news stories to hundreds of newspapers. As a result, identical stories (and errors) appeared in many of them. For example: both The Milwaukee Sentinel and The New York Times reported that Chicago was an "indescribable scene of terror and devastation," and that, "Almost everybody -- men, women, and children -- are in the streets, and the weeping and wailing are heard in every direction."

Similarly, an "Extra" published that Monday afternoon by The Daily Picayune in New Orleans reported that flames threatened to destroy Chicago. On Tuesday, The Daily Picayune declared, "All is terror." Three-fourths of the city was destroyed, 150,000 people were homeless, and the flames were out of control. Inconsistently, another bulletin on the same page reported that the fire was under control.

On Wednesday, The Daily Picayune announced: "The origin of the fire was in a stable where a woman, with a kerosene lamp, went to milk a cow."[22] A later bulletin disagreed; it insisted, "Late on Sunday, a boy went into a stable, on DeKaven Street, near the river, on the West Side, to milk a cow, carrying with

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him a kerosene lamp, which was kicked over by the cow, and the burning fluid scattered among the straw. This was the beginning of the fire." The story added that firemen arrived slowly and, "stupefied by the exertions at the fire on Saturday night, worked slowly and clumsily."[24]

In Louisville, Ky., The Courier-Journal reported: "A boy went into a stable on DeKeen Street near the river, on East Side, to milk a cow, carrying with him a kerosene lamp; this was kicked over by the cow, and the burning fluid scattered among the straw. This was the beginning of the great fire."[25] The New York Times published a similar story and explained that it had been "especially prepared for The Associated Press by those who witnessed and fought the flames."[26]

The following Sunday, The Daily Picayune reported two new theories. First, boys playing with matches might have started the fire. Second, a gentleman positively asserted that the fire was started by "the explosion of a coal oil lamp."[27]

In addition to describing the fire, newspapers also described and encouraged efforts to help the survivors. Editorials called the fire "a national misfortune" and urged Americans everywhere to contribute money and supplies.

A few newspapers in the South were less charitable. A paper in Rushville, Ind., said the fire helped compensate for the North's destruction of the South during the Civil War. Its story continued: "It was far different when Sherman's army desolated and destroyed the fairest region of the South, robbing and plundering, and burning as they went, leaving the people to starve; or, when Sheridan, a monster of cruelty, overran and destroyed the valley of Virginia...."[28]

The Rushville paper also complained that Northern raids during the Civil War had destroyed more property and killed more people than the Chicago fire, yet Northerners had rejoiced when they heard the news.

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News Of "Atrocities"

Every newspaper that reported the fire published some stories that were exaggerated or inaccurate. But some newspapers published more than others. The most sensational and inaccurate stories seemed to appear in the Boston Daily Evening Transcript and in The (New York) World.

The Boston Daily Evening Transcript estimated that 500 persons burned to death and that hundreds more were trampled in the rush to escape.[29] The Evening Transcript added that some firemen had died, that a wagon full of bodies had been driven through Chicago's streets, that arsonists were setting new fires in Chicago, and that, "Seven or eight have been hung or shot at sight."[30]

On Wednesday, the Evening Transcript reported, "Two fiends caught in the act of firing a house on the West Side were arrested and immediately hung to lamp posts -- one on Fifteenth Street, near the river, and the other, 3 miles away, on Claiborne Avenue, North Side."[31]

The Evening Transcript's most sensational story reported that 70 convicts died in a Chicago prison. The story explained: 'A large number of people gathered about the building and clamored for the turnkey to release the prisoners. He showed himself and said the building was perfectly fire-proof, and no harm could result to the confined, and he should not release the convicts. Soon the building was enveloped in flames."[32]

Other sources said all the prisoners escaped. One of the sources explained that Chicago's mayor established his command post in the courthouse and "ordered the jail prisoners released."[33] The second source agreed that 150 prisoners were released from cells in the courthouse basement -- but complained that they looted a nearby jewelry store.

The (New York) World seemed to give all the information it received to its most imaginative editor. He combined the information in a single story and used his imagination to fill in the gaps.

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The World reported that Chicago had disappeared into a sea of fire. That little children "whimpered with terror." That half-naked women were running and screaming through the city's streets. And that, "Those who were strongest and most cowardly knocked the others down in their delirium; men, women, and children were trampled upon by human hordes that fled without reason hither and thither, uttering the most pitiful moans and cries of distress."[34]

The World added that arson, rape, and even murder were common; thus, "it was found necessary to form vigilance committees who promptly disposed of the culprits...." The World claimed that even the soldiers guarding Chicago refused to arrest criminals. Instead, soldiers "shot them on the spot."

Other newspapers exaggerated the number of dead. Some newspapers reported that searchers found 120 bodies in the ashes. Others reported that searchers found 250 bodies. Still others estimated that 1,500 people died in the flames.[35]

Newspapers reported dozen of other horror stories. Some may be true, but most seem exaggerated, or even totally fictitious. For example:

*The (London) Times reported that "crowds of starving people threatened a riot."[36]

*The Daily Picayune reported, "Rooms which rented last week for $50 now command $5,000."

*The Milwaukee Sentinel reported that a gentleman offered $5 for a drink of water but was unable to obtain it.

*The Milwaukee Sentinel also reported that thieves blew open safes in the ruins, and that other scoundrels set new fires to hide their crimes.[37]

*The Boston Daily Evening Transcript reported that some persons jumped from upper windows, and that parents tied their babies into beds, then threw the beds out windows.[38]

*The Courier-Journal reported: "On Chicago Avenue, a father rushed upstairs to carry three children away, when he was overtaken with the flames and perished with them. The mother was afterward seen on the streets, on the North and West sides, a raving maniac."[39]

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There was some looting and considerable drunkenness in Chicago that week. Saloon keepers rolled barrels of alcohol into the streets in an effort to save them, and people helped themselves. Also, criminals looted abandoned homes and stores, and some teamsters demanded exorbitant fees from people anxious to save their belongings. But the number of crimes and the number of criminals killed by mobs was greatly exaggerated.

Gen. Philip H. Sheridan commanded the military district that included Chicago, and Sheridan immediately dispatched soldiers from Fort Omaha and supplies from an Army depot in Indiana. On Oct. 12, Sheridan reported to Chicago's mayor: "I am happy to state that no case of outbreak or disorder has been reported. No authenticated attempt at incendiarism has reached me, and the people of the city are calm, quiet, and well-disposed."

Despite Sheridan's statement, the rumors continued. On Oct. 17, he again reported: "There has been no case of violence since the disaster of Sunday night and Monday morning. The reports in the public press of violence and disorder here are without the slightest foundation. There has not been a single case of arson, hanging, or shooting -- not even a case of riot or street-fight."[40]

The New York Times agreed. It reported: "The city is still disorganized but not disorderly. The stories which have been telegraphed of attempted incendiarism and lynchings are pronounced by Gen. Sheridan to be fabrications, and no substantiated cases of such outrage can be found."[41]

Why were so many stories about the fire so sensational and inaccurate?

No single source knew the entire story. Instead, reporters had to piece the story together, obtaining some details from one source, other details from a second source, and additional details from several other sources. Many of the sources were tired, frightened, and confused. Under the circumstances, some exaggerations and rumors were inevitable.

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Moreover, journalists had no way of determining which details were true and which were false. Even the most inaccurate details may have seemed true because they were provided by normally reliable sources or because they contained familiar names or other specific details.

To reduce its telegraph bills, The Associated Press seems to have transmitted skeletonized stories that contained only a few key words. Some editors published the skeletonized stories. Others tried to fill in the missing words -- or combined and rewrote all the information they received. So hundreds of newspapers received identical bulletins, but the stories they published rarely remained identical. The punctuation, the wording, even some "facts" changed. Because of typographical errors, so did many spellings.

Despite the problems, Americans had to rely upon their local newspapers. People in other cities were unable to see and judge the scene for themselves. They received no picture magazines. No newsreels. No radio. No television.

Moreover, historians have been unable to find a single photograph taken during the fire. Some photographs may have been lost or destroyed. Or, using the primitive techniques available at that time, it may have been too difficult (and dangerous) to photograph the bright flames, particularly at night.

Some sketches and paintings drawn after the flames were extinguished portray Mrs. O'Leary as a witch, surrounded by rats and black cats. Others portray her as a devil, with horns and a tail.

A Communist Plot?

On Oct. 23, The Chicago Times published a story so bizarre that the newspaper's own editors admitted that it might be false. The story claimed that Communists started the fire. The Chicago Times said it had received a complete confession from one of the conspirators but published his confession "without the expression of any opinion as to its authenticity."[42]

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The conspirator said he was a member of The Societe Internationale, and that two Communists from Paris helped him establish a branch in Chicago. They wanted to promote Communistic sentiments among the masses in Chicago: "to elevate workingmen to the level of the rich" so everyone would "enjoy equal benefits, and poverty would be unknown."

For two months, the society tried to stir up trouble between the city's laborers and their employers. After failing, one of the conspirators suggested burning the city's business district.

On Sept. 30, they ignited a warehouse and hoped the flames would spread to a row of wooden buildings. A sudden change in the wind foiled their plans. On Oct. 7 (Saturday night), they started another fire "and for a few hours all seemed to be working well." Then one or two of the group's petroleum mines failed to explode, saving the city from destruction.

On Sunday, they ignited a half dozen new mines. When flames reached the Chicago River, they set off more mines on the opposite side. Parts of the city might have escaped, but their colleagues were everywhere. One, pretending to save some household goods, rushed inside an abandoned building. Moments later, "The rear of the building became a mass of flame, and a gust of wind carried it eastward....over the district that had thus far been spared, thus completing the universal ruin."

The fire became larger and more destructive than planned, but the conspirators were dissatisfied. Too many buildings survived. Also, the fire crippled their organization. The [illegible]men from Paris died in the flames. Seven conspirators also died, and two others were crippled for life. The author added that he would be killed for violating the society's oath of secrecy.

Why did The Chicago Times publish the story? It was an exclusive and sensational story, and The Chicago Times was a sensational newspaper. One of its reporters may have written the story. Or, someone may have given it to a reporter, insisting that it was true.

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Witnesses Exonerate The O'Leary's

On Nov. 15, The Chicago Tribune complained that the city's Board of Police and Fire Commissioners failed in its duty to investigate and to report on the causes and progress of the fire. So The Tribune started its own investigation. It began by sending a reporter to interview the fire marshal and his assistants, then published the results. Nine days later, the Board of Police and Fire Commissioners announced that it would investigate the fire. One of its first witnesses was Catharine O'Leary.

Earlier, The Chicago Times described Mrs. O'Leary as a 70-year-old hag. During the November hearings, The Times reported that Mrs. O'Leary appeared before the board with a baby in her arms. It added, "She is a tall, stout, Irish woman, with no intelligence, and acted as if she believed the city wanted her to pay every cent of the losses created by the fire."[43]

Mrs. O'Leary testified that she, her husband, and all their children were in bed when the fire started. She added that the McLaughlins, who rented the front half of their home, had a party that night. Mrs. O'Leary did not know how many persons attended the party, nor who they were, nor when they left. None of her family attended. After the fire, a neighbor told Mrs. O'Leary that a guest at the party had gone to the barn to get some milk and carried a lantern. However, Mrs. O'Leary said she had not seen anyone and could not swear the story was true.

Catharine Sullivan, a neighbor on DeKoven Street, testified that she had been washing dishes and noticed a bright reflection on her window panes. Running into the street, she saw the O'Leary's barn on fire. She heard that the O'Learys were asleep and that the McLaughlins were having a party, but could not swear it was true.

On Nov. 23, Catharine McLaughlin testified that five young men and two women, including a relative who had just arrived from Ireland, were at her house that night. Her husband played two tunes on his fiddle, but there was little dancing.

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Mrs. McLaughlin insisted that she had not started her stove that night, that she had not cooked anything, that she had not even served any food. However, someone may have gone out once or twice for some beer.

Mrs. McLaughlin added that she heard someone cry "Fire," then looked outside and saw the O'Leary's barn in flames. Her guests were still in the house. None had gone out to get milk for a punch because she never served punch.

The Chicago Times described Patrick O'Leary as a fast talker and "a stupid looking type of man" who could not read or write. O'Leary testified that he had not been in the barn that day or night; his wife and daughter cared for the family's cows. O'Leary added that his wife had gone to bed at about 8 p.m., and he followed her half an hour later. When awakened, O'Leary put their children into the street, then climbed onto the roof and threw water on it until after 1 a.m.

Other witnesses said the O'Leary's home began to smoulder, and the rear of the home caught fire several times during the next few hours. But each time they extinguished the flames, helped by neighbors and by guests from McLaughlin's party.

One of the next witnesses was Daniel "Peg Leg" Sullivan,* a neighbor with a wooden leg. Sullivan said he had gone to the O'Leary's home at about 8 p.m., and that Mrs. O'Leary was already in bed. He was told that she had hurt her foot, and it ached. After a short visit, Sullivan started for home. He stopped to fill his pipe, then sat on a curb to enjoy it. As he sat directly opposite the O'Leary's, Sullivan noticed flames in their barn. He hobbled across the street, crying "Fire" as loudly as he could. The barn door was open, and he ran inside, tried to cut loose the horse and cows, but saved only a half-burned calf.

Sullivan and another witness also testified that they saw Patrick and Catharine O'Leary come outside after being awakened by the clamor. Sullivan

*Some newspapers spelled his name "Danile." Others said it was "Dennis" or "Denis," spelled with only one "n." Similarly, some newspapers spelled Mrs. O'Leary's name "Catherine," with two "e's."

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added that he had not seen anyone leave the McLaughlin's party but would have noticed anyone who had.

On Dec. 11, the Board of Police and Fire Commissioners issued its report. It had heard 51 witnesses and had taken more than 900 pages of sworn testimony. The board concluded that the fire started in the O'Leary's barn and that, "The fire was first discovered by a drayman by the name of Daniel Sullivan, who saw it while sitting on the sidewalk on the south side of DeKoven Street, and nearly opposite O'Leary's premises." Sullivan fixed the time at between 9:20 and 9:25 p.m.

However, the board was unable to determine what caused the fire. It explained: "There is no proof that any persons had been in the barn after nightfall that evening. Whether it originated from a spark blown from a chimney on that windy night, or was set on fire by human agency, we are unable to determine. Mr. O'Leary, the owner, and all his family, prove to have been in bed and asleep at the time. There was a small party in the front part of O'Leary's house, which was occupied by Mr. McLaughlin and wife. But we failed to find any evidence that anybody from McLaughlin's part of the house went near the barn that night."[44]

Why had the fire spread so quickly?

The board concluded that the first fire engine arrived 10 or 15 minutes after Sullivan discovered the fire. By then, three to five buildings were in flames, and strong winds carried the flames to other buildings. Moreover, at least four of the district's best fire engines were sent to the wrong address.

The board calculated that the fire burned over 2,150 acres, and that 117 bodies were found in the ruins. Finally, the board also concluded: "The firemen and their officers were sober, and did all that men could do. They worked heroically to save the property of others when their own houses were burning and their families fleeing from the flames. Many had worked 18 hours Saturday night and were nearly exhausted when this fire started."

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Thus, no one disputed the fact that the O'Learys were in bed when the fire started. Common sense also exonerates Mrs. O'Leary. If Mrs. O'Leary had gotten out of bed and gone to the barn, Sullivan would have seen her. And if she had started the fire, she almost certainly would have called for help. The five cows in the barn helped support her family. Because of their value, Mrs. O'Leary was unlikely to start a fire, then quietly return to bed: without calling for help, without trying to save the cows, without trying to extinguish the flames.

She had nothing to gain. None of the O'Leary's property was insured. And, at the moment the fire started, she could not have known that it would spread to any other buildings.

What Really Caused The Fire?

By Oct. 27, The Chicago Tribune reported, "There have been not less than 900 causes assigned for the Chicago conflagration." Most people blamed "the wrath of God" but disagreed about why God was mad at Chicago.[45] A methodist minister suggested it was because Chicago's voters had approved some new liquor laws.

A Wisconsin reformer named Ignatius Donnelly offered the most unusual theory. Donnelly explained that a comet had passed over the Midwest thousands of years earlier and had created new, flammable elements in the soil. Other persons insisted that the houses in Chicago had been built of a limestone that contained oil, and that the oil ignited.

The most popular theories involved an angry cow. People explained that someone disturbed the cow several hours past its normal milking time, and that the angry cow kicked over a kerosene lamp. But who disturbed the cow? There were several suspects:

*Despite her testimony, perhaps Catharine O'Leary had gone to the barn to care for a sick cow or to get some milk for a customer.

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*Or, Patrick O'Leary had gone to the barn because his wife refused to cook his supper until he milked the cow. "Then he, in a fit of temper, gave the cow a kick...then the cow kicked at O'Leary but hit the lamp, and that started the fire...."46

*Or, Patrick O'Leary had come home later than usual and put off the milking until after he ate. He took a lamp and pail out to the barn "and was getting along all right until the cow switched her tail around his face, nearly blinding him, causing him to boot the lamp over; thus setting fire to the hay before he could stop it."47

*Or, someone at the McLaughlin's party had slipped into the barn to get fresh milk for a punch or oyster stew.

*Or, a group of young men who had been playing cards tried to get some milk.

Five other theories were almost as popular:

*Tramps sleeping in the barn started the fire

*Or, young boys enjoying a pipe or cigar started the fire.

*Or, spontaneous combustion started the fire in the hayloft.

*Or, an adult had stepped into the open barn to light a pipe or cigar while sheltered from the strong wind, and he started the fire.

*Or, three men trying out a new terrier had been chasing rats in the O'Leary's barn, and one of them dropped a lighted match.

One of the O'Leary's sons, Big Jim O'Leary, became a famous gambler and politician. Big Jim O'Leary admitted that the fire started in his family's barn. But O'Leary blamed tramps or neighborhood boys who were smoking. O'Leary said his mother blamed a neighbor's carelessness (probably the McLaughlin's).

A Reporter's Hoax?

Five sources, all apparently reliable, say a newspaper reporter created the story about Mrs. O'Leary's cow.

John McPhaul, author of one of the best books about Chicago journalism, explains, "The legend of Mrs. O'Leary had its start the night of the fire." According to McPhaul, a correspondent for The (New York) Herald wrote a story

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that quoted Mrs. O'Leary. His story insisted that "she had gone to the shed to give salt to an ailing cow, and the animal had kicked over a kerosene lamp."[48]

A book about The Chicago Tribune agrees that, "The correspondent of The Herald said the fire began when Mrs. O'Leary went out to milk her cow, which kicked over a lantern."[49] Similarly, a third source declares that the fire started in Mrs. O'Leary's cowshed "several hours after she had milked the cow, which, according to a reporter's fabrication that gained universal acceptance, kicked over a kerosene lamp."[50]

The fourth source identifies the reporter: Michael Ahern. Moreover, it adds that Ahern "admitted that he made up the whole story to add color to his account of the fire."[51]

The fifth source provides a slightly different account. It states: "The last survivor of the group which reported the Chicago fire of 1871 admitted, shortly before his death, that Mrs. O'Leary's cow had not kicked over the lantern. The fire had started from spontaneous combustion in a hayloft, but a fretful Bossie seemed to the reporters a more picturesque origin of the disaster."[52] The fifth account suggests that several reporters, not Ahern alone, helped create the story.

Despite the claims, The Herald seems to have been one of the last newspapers to mention Mrs. O'Leary's cow, not the first. On Monday, The Herald reported, "The fire started in a row of two-story wooden tenements on Deckoven Street."[53] Its story was skimpy, probably because the fire destroyed the telegraph lines leading into Chicago. Because the lines were destroyed, it would have been difficult, perhaps impossible, for Ahern to transmit his story to The Herald that night.

The Herald did not mention a cow until Wednesday. Even then, it failed to mention Mrs. O'Leary. Instead, The Herald reported that the fire started when a boy went to a stable to milk his cow. Later on the same page, The Herald

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reported for a second time that a boy went into a stable "to milk a cow, carrying with him a kerosene lamp. This was kicked over by the cow, and the burning fluid scattered among the straw. This was the beginning of the great fire."[54]

That story, like most of the others published by The Herald, seems to have been provided by The Associated Press, not by its own correspondent in Chicago.

The Evening Journal was published in Chicago that Monday, and it immediately reported that, "The fire broke out...at about 9 o'clock on Sunday evening, being caused by a cow kicking over a lamp in a stable in which a woman was milking." Its story -- not a story in The Herald -- seems to have been the first to mention Mrs. O'Leary's cow.[55]

Newspapers in other cities began to publish similar stories that Tuesday. Some admitted copying the Evening Journal.[56] Also, the reporters in Chicago undoubtedly knew and often saw one another. During the fire, they may have met in the telegraph office (or at a popular saloon). Several reporters may have heard a picturesque rumor, started by someone else, and all those reporters may have included it in their stories. Or, Michael Ahern may have worked for the Evening Journal, or for some other Chicago daily, and supplemented his income by serving as a correspondent for a New York daily. If so, Ahern may have submitted his story to the Chicago paper before transmitting it to New York.

Or, a correspondent for The Associated Press may have seen the story in a Chicago paper, copied it, then transmitted it to hundreds of other papers. Mistakenly, readers who saw the story in a New York paper may have assumed that it appeared there first.

Regardless of the story's source, it was a fanciful tale. After it appeared in either a Chicago or a New York daily, it was certain to be noticed and copied by other journalists. And to be believed by millions of Americans.

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Footnotes

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[22]"The Destruction of Chicago," The Milwaukee Sentinel, Oct. 10, 1871, p. 1.

[23]"Further Particulars of the Chicago Fire," The Daily Picayune, Oct. 11, 1871, p. 1.

[24]Ibid.

[25]"Worse and Worse," The Courier-Journal, Oct. 11, 1871, p. 1.

[26]"The Ruined City," The New York Times, Oct. 11, 1871, p. 1.

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